

Written Testimony of Christopher Phelps
Chairman of the Portland Board of Education

Wednesday, February 17, 2010

Written testimony supporting Raised H.B. 5033, An Act Requiring The Installation
And Use Of Seat Safety Belts On School Buses

Representative Guerrero, Senator DeFronzo, and members of the Transportation Committee:

Thank you for the opportunity to submit this testimony supporting Raised House Bill 5033. My name is Christopher Phelps. I have been a member of the Portland, Connecticut Board of Education since 2003 and have been the board chairman since 2008.

While preparing this testimony, I reviewed many statements made by opponents of past legislative proposals mandating seat belts on school buses. One of the most common arguments against such mandates is that "school buses are one of the safest forms of transportation." This is typically backed up by various statistics showing the small number of fatalities that occur in school bus crashes each year.

I don't doubt the accuracy of such statements. If I did, then I would not allow my children to take a bus to school every day. However, when reading the arguments for school bus safety made by opponents of seat belt mandates, I was struck by how carefully they avoid suggesting that seat belts would not improve school bus safety.

In truth, that is the essential point of this legislation. It is summed up in a cliché we all know well. "*Seat Belts Save Lives.*" As parents, we teach this to our children. Starting on the day we bring them home from the hospital, we make sure they are buckled up every time they get in a car. However, once they start Kindergarten, we put them on a bus every morning knowing they will not be buckled up for the trip to and from school.

Why?

The answer to that question is simply, and unfortunately, the cost involved with mandating seat belts on school buses. School districts do not have the money in their budgets to comply with such a mandate. The expense would be significant and would divert limited resources away from other areas of school budgets.

Following the recent tragic school bus accident on I-84, I asked the Portland Superintendent of Schools to work with our transportation vendor to estimate the cost our district would incur if we installed seat belts on all of our school buses. The answer was that we would experience one-time costs to retrofit our current buses as well as increased recurring costs from the need to add additional buses to our system due to the use of seat belts reducing seating capacity to 2 per seat. (Currently, our buses have a 3 person seating capacity for elementary grades.) Additionally, the

bus company and our staff recommended hiring bus monitors to ensure that younger children are using the seat belts correctly. This would be an additional recurring expense.

Our initial estimated costs associated with adding seat belts to Portland's buses are:

- At least \$200,000 one-time cost to retrofit existing buses.
- At least \$290,000 annually recurring expense for additional buses and staffing for bus monitors.

In January, the Portland Board of Education submitted a FY2011 budget request to the Portland First Selectwoman that includes approximately \$600,000 for student transportation out of a total \$18.2 million budget. Our total requested FY2011 budget increase is \$525,541, or 2.97% above the FY2010 budget. Based on the estimated costs referenced above, a school bus seat belt mandate implemented in FY2011 would add at least an additional 2.6% increase to our FY2011 budget. Additionally, the associated recurring costs would increase our annual budgets by more than 1.5% in FY2012 and beyond.

The Portland schools simply cannot afford to absorb the cost of a school bus seat belt mandate in FY2011. For the foreseeable future, compliance with such a mandate would force our school system to divert financial resources away from classrooms to fund increased student transportation expenses.

However, I am not urging this committee to reject H.B. 5033. To do so would effectively place a price on the safety of every school child in the state of Connecticut, including my own son and daughter. Instead, I urge you to consider amending H.B. 5033 to phase-in the seat belt requirement over a more manageable time frame. Additionally, I suggest that the committee consider implementing a smaller-scale pilot program installing seat belts in a handful of small, medium and large school districts statewide. The goals of such a pilot could include identifying the real-world costs associated with retrofitting existing Connecticut school buses and monitoring student use of seat belts.

Thank you for the opportunity to offer this testimony in support of Raised House Bill 5033.

Sincerely,

Christopher Phelps
Chairman
Portland Board of Education

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